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The Cost of Cheap Freedom and the Liberation of Discipleship

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Abstract

This essay argues that the freedom of the market has in turn become a new form of captivity. Describing the freedom associated with market relations, as conceived by F.A. Hayek, as a negative and cheap form of freedom primarily exercised in a freedom from outside interference, I discuss the cost of fully embracing this kind of freedom to the common life of a society and its constituents, identifying its true price in pervasive fragmentation, animosity, and injustice. I will then contrast this view of freedom with the positive freedom of discipleship described as the new way of life (κοινωνία) for God's people in Acts 2. In conclusion, I argue that the liberation of discipleship can ultimately free us from the economic enslavement to which we have become so accustomed.

Key Words

capitalism, fellowship, captivity, freedom, Hayek, koinonia, justice

On June 8, 2010, Glen Beck – the host of an eponymously named and extremely popular Fox News show – devoted his entire program to a discussion of a mid-twentieth century Viennese economist most people knew nothing of and whose name they likely could not even pronounce. The economist was Friedrich August von Hayek, better known as F.A. Hayek. It was a strange choice for a program usually devoted more to current events and hot-button political commentary. But Beck clearly thought the country was at a “crossroads” and that the future of the nation was at stake. The worst economic crisis since the Great Depression had rocked the country only a few years earlier and many people and institutions were still reeling. Even more, our leaders were torn on how to move forward in recovery. As Beck perceived it, the nation was flirting with socialism if not full-blown crimson communism, the end of which could only be totalitarianism and oppression. With such weighty decisions hanging in the balance, Beck thought it essential

to return to this historical figure who had championed the free-market system against its socialist despisers. On the line was freedom itself. As Beck saw it, and as he desperately wanted his viewers to see it, capitalism was the only option, the only system consistent with liberty, prosperity, and human dignity. As indicated by the title to Hayek's book, any collectivist effort would soon head down *The Road to Serfdom* following what was sure would be repressive governmental intrusion into our entire lives. What Beck never stopped to consider, however, was the precise kind of freedom he was advocating. After all, there *are* different kinds of freedom.

In this essay I will describe the conception of freedom connected with free-market economics, especially in its more aggressive forms. By examining Hayek's thinking, I will show that the freedom of the marketplace is really a negative form of freedom – one that lacks any content and therefore has no positive or collective aims to shape common life. By terming this *cheap freedom*, or freedom from outside interference, I will identify its true costs in the fragmentation, animosity, and injustice that pervade society. I will then contrast this view of freedom with the positive freedom of discipleship described as the new way of life for God's people in Acts 2:41-47. In conclusion, I argue that the liberation of discipleship can ultimately free us from the economic enslavement to which we have become so accustomed.

Cheap freedom and its hidden costs

F.A. Hayek was a well-respected economist who wrote his influential book in the post-war period. He lectured at the London School of Economics and, along with other prominent philosophers, historians, and economists, founded the Mont Pelerin Society, an

economic think tank devoted to the principles of individual and market freedom.¹ Through his work with the Society, Hayek helped to shape the views of the eminent University of Chicago economist Milton Friedman, who became a vigorous proponent of these neoliberal ideas in the U.S and abroad. Written against the threat of Soviet communism and the post-war rise of Fabian central planners, Hayek argues in *The Road to Serfdom* that ordering society toward a common and collective good ultimately results in dictatorship, as totalitarianism is the inevitable outcome of any attempt to interfere with or intentionally shape the economy.² He maintains the market is so complex that no central administrator could understand it, and adds that any attempt to orchestrate the economy would ultimately engender an ever-expanding reach of the government into the minutiae of each person's life and the natural workings of the market – thus disrupting price mechanisms and engendering inefficiency and state-centered captivity. Such manipulation would stifle growth, distort markets, and erode individual freedom. For Hayek, as with his neoliberal descendants, human dignity is singly lodged in the freedom of individual choice and the ability to arrange and order one's life apart from any sense of compulsion or oversight by others.³

If this view does not sound strange, it is simply because Hayek's market liberalism has won the day and is now so ingrained in our culture that it is rarely challenged by anyone, including members of both major political parties. Its pillars of privatization, deregulation, reduced taxation, strong property laws, suffusion of markets, and cuts to social spending are taken for granted as good policy. Collectivism is deemed a

¹ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), 20-22.

² F.A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 110.

³ *Ibid.*, 216-217.

dangerous fiction and, as the first step of individual enslavement, it must be countered completely with a heightened emphasis on individual rights. By 1987, this had become such a widely shared sentiment no one batted an eye to the then British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's statement that "there's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families."⁴ For devotees of the powerful Chicago School of Economics, under the tutelage of Friedman, freedom meant each person acting according to her own self-interested desires, allowing the "laws" of markets to sort things out from there. According to Friedman's own account in *Capitalism and Freedom*, this was the purest form of participatory democracy where "each man can vote, as it were, for the color of tie he wants and get it."⁵

No one could deny the power of markets to coordinate activities and to organize life in remarkable ways; and one could certainly understand Hayek's (and Friedman's) concern for governmental overreach, as the violence and repression of totalitarian regimes have marred the course of world history. But Hayek's devotion to the freedom of the market, a devotion our society has inherited, also has its costs. What's at stake here goes well beyond economic theory and preference, for it suggests a more basic view of humanity and socio-political relations that goes to the very core of our existence.

The foremost of these costs is the thin form of freedom that neoliberal economics promotes. Though mostly unrecognized, the consequences of such an expansive form of market-defined freedom are quite substantial. If freedom is defined as the individual liberty to do as one pleases – free, as it were, from the intrusions of others – not only does

⁴ Thatcher, Margaret, Interview for *Woman's Own*. Margaret Thatcher Foundation website, September 23, 1987 available at: <https://www.margareththatcher.org/document/106689> accessed April 24, 2018.

⁵ Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1965; reprint, 1982), 21.

the market, more than ethics come to determine our actions, but this market-oriented view hollows out the substance of our collective life so as to destroy it entirely. When we are left on our own to pursue our individual consumer interests, we begin to lose all sense of a corporate identity. Because of this, working and acting together for the common and greater good becomes nearly inconceivable. As Timothy Gorringer suggests, what is sacrificed here is the reality of justice, the absence of which “follows clearly from Hayek’s view of society and the human.”⁶ Gorringer continues, asserting that a society constructed around this market-oriented notion of freedom can have no idea of justice because it lacks a unified common good capable of informing any notion of justice. Owing to its particular conception of freedom, then, market economics is fundamentally bound to produce a society of injustice.⁷ Lacking a center, this sort of freedom cannot amount to anything more than a collection of individual desires and interests, which are based on the hope that the market will somehow continue to hold all of us together despite the wide disparity between winners and losers. What we may gain in terms of individual preference and independence comes at the cost of the collaborative efforts and connective tissues that give shape to a collective way of life. All the virtues, higher purposes, and sense of belonging that arise in humans as a result of having a shared and communal project tend to evaporate, and we are left with isolated, lonely, diminished lives dedicated to the immediacy of consumer desire and the prospect of market growth.

The cost of this negative freedom, or freedom *from* the collective or common good, has been fragmentation, loneliness, the loss of virtue and, ultimately, a growing sense of nihilism. Moreover, if Naomi Klein’s reporting is to be believed, this unfettered

⁶ Timothy J. Gorringer, “Economics and the Priority of Ethics,” *Studies in Christian Ethics*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (2015): 426.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 426-427.

brand of capitalism is often accompanied by “brutal forms of coercion” which have already been foisted on citizens from Chile and Argentina to Russia, Iraq, and even New Orleans through oppressive actions that frequently seize on and then greatly precipitate the jolt of traumatic incidents, natural or political in origin, in order to establish pro-business climates that are inherently unjust and anti-democratic.⁸ Following the prescripts of this “shock doctrine,” the process of making individuals “free” in the manner described above often requires a forceful destruction of the bonds and ties endogenous to human social orders. So, even though Hayek’s version of freedom has won the day, it has also morphed into its own kind of captivity. The vacuity, ethical relativism, and aggressive corporatism that so pervades our capitalist society is the purchase price of such freedom – the remedy for which cannot be found by simply adding or multiplying markets. Justice and the common good are sacrificed to the single collective project of market function, wherein human persons are reduced to human capital and consumers or dismissed as inefficient and unproductive – and thus rendering them entirely expendable. In the end, a society constructed on and around such “freedom” becomes no society at all, but rather a random assortment of self-interested individuals left to the bidding of the market. This may also go a long way toward explaining the rise of Trumpism, whose proclivity for autarchy, corporate enrichment, divisiveness, and assault on public goods

⁸ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2007), 23. Klein’s study documents the connection between torture and extreme capitalism, moving from the Southern Cone of South America to the most recent War on Terror, and the response of the corporatist state to hurricane Katrina.

mimic those of his predecessors like General Pinochet in Chile... though in a decidedly more farcical manner because of its reality-show theatrics.⁹

The freedom of discipleship

If Hayek's view of market freedom, despite its costs, presents itself as the only option for avoiding the specter of totalitarianism, then I want to return now to the view of community found in scripture in order to illuminate the liberative promise of discipleship within the church as a real theological alternative. If, as Nancy Murphy and others have stated, "the purpose of the church now is to prefigure the will of God for human society as a whole... to show the world how all people will live in the kingdom of God," then we should hope to find in it just such an alternative.¹⁰ For in this very way, the church may function as the witness and servant for a society held captive by a market economics which has escaped any container and now greatly determines life across the globe. To explore this possibility, I turn now to the second chapter of the book of Acts.

The question of freedom is not foreign to the larger corpus of Luke-Acts. After all, the author narrates Jesus' first sermon as a reading of the jubiliary declaration of Isaiah the prophet in Luke 4:16-21, setting the tone and content of his ministry. Following Jesus's ascension (Acts 1:9), the same "Spirit of the Lord" (πνεῦμα κυρίου) he proclaimed at the beginning of the gospel, now in mirror image, comes upon the apostles (ἐπλήσθησαν πάντες πνεύματος ἁγίου) at Pentecost in Acts 2. For the reader,

⁹ For Klein's discussion of Pinochet and his connection to the Chicago Boys, see especially chapters 2-4. For a theological account of these events, see William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1998).

¹⁰ Nancey Murphy, "Using MacIntyre's Method in Christian Ethics," in *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after MacIntyre*, eds., Nancey Murphy, Brad J. Kallenburg, and Mark Thiessen Nation (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003; reprint of Trinity International Press, 1997), 32.

this signals that the same ministry of the “good news” (εὐαγγελίσασθαι) (Luke 4:18) present in Jesus is now engulfing his followers, who will become participant-witnesses in its mission. God is forming a new people joined by and in the power of the Spirit, connecting them in a new way for a real and meaningful mission. As the first words of Willie Jennings’ commentary remind us, “The book of Acts speaks of revolution.”¹¹ Speaking of the Pentecost (Acts 2:1-11), Charles Talbert claims that “echoes of the Sinai covenant are to be heard,” with wind, fire, and power all used to describe the theophany.¹² As Talbert portrays it, God is constituting here a new people empowered by the Spirit to do his will as the fulfillment of his long-made promises.¹³ Peter’s sermon in vs. 14-36 interprets this event in a theo-political declaration, asserting that the victorious resurrected life of Jesus, following the prophecy of Joel, is now being “poured out” (v. 17) (ἐκχεῖν ἀπο τοῦ πνεύματος μου) in the Spirit who seeks to gather this “entire house of Israel” (v. 36) (πᾶς οἶκος Ἰσραὴλ) as the seed of the new humanity that is the expanding Kingdom.

The immediate outcome of citizenship in this Spirit-endowed community is a new kind of fellowship known as κοινωνία (*koinonia*). In the brief conclusion to Acts 2 in vs. 41-47, cognates of the term occur twice (vs. 42 and 44) in a chiasm that moves from evangelization (v. 41) to common life (v. 42) to signs and wonders (v. 43) and then back out to common life (vs. 44-47) and evangelization (v. 47b).¹⁴ It is thus the connecting

¹¹ Willie James Jennings, *Acts* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 1. Jennings claims that this revolution begins to take shape in the events of Pentecost where “the Spirit creates joining. The followers of Jesus are now being connected in a way that joins them to people in the most intimate space—of voice, money, sound, body, land, and place” (28).

¹² Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), 41.

¹³ Ibid., 42.

¹⁴ Ibid., 50.

tissue of the vital power of God's presence and the expanding reach of that newly tangible presence in the world. The term *koinonia* shares a root with the communion of "sharing all things in common" (v. 44) (εἶχον ἅπαντα κοινὰ) and, accordingly, its meaning for the author is most visibly manifest in the celebration of the table meal, "the breaking of bread and the prayers" (v. 42) that is the Eucharist. Thus, it goes beyond a sense of mutual good feeling. As Justo Gonzalez points out, the term implies "'corporation', 'common enterprise', or 'company', similar to the way" in which we might say, today, "that Peter and John own a 'company', that they are 'partners', or that they own a 'corporation.'" As a joint venture, a unified community gathered in the pursuit of a common mission and incorporated into a shared identity, this fellowship (*koinonia*) includes "solidarity" in the sharing of "feelings, goods, and actions."¹⁵ Being joined in the fellowship to the Spirit, a new community of disciples is born whose very identity and mission shape its economic life in mutual provision (v. 44). Freed by the power of the resurrection, this liberated people can now find the ordinary and routine functions of their life together shaped by the person of Jesus.¹⁶ It is this freedom for one another, along with the common fellowship of God and humanity, that the author of Acts portrays as the central marks of the newly founded church.

Dwelling on this theme of liberated fellowship (*koinonia*), James McClendon has argued that in its wider New Testament use the notion implies the sharing of the whole community in the "indwelling Spirit." As such, its essence is active and material

¹⁵ Justo L. Gonzalez, *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 50-51. As Willie Jennings puts it in his discussion of the community described in Acts, "The common is the condition of joined life where the haves and the have-nots are bound together in clear sight of one another and in shared support. The common is the redistribution of life where the Spirit invites us to a sharing of space and place, resources and dreams... the common joins, weaving together purpose and hope in the life of discipleship to Jesus" (Jennings, *Acts*, 9-10).

¹⁶ Jennings, *Acts*, 31.

affection. As McClendon states, *koinonia* indicates the “common love,” or the “Christian love... of those whose lives are being remade by the resurrection of Christ” that was characteristic of the apostolic church.¹⁷ The manifestation of this love was the mutual provision associated with the regular practice of collective prayer, and communion as the core of the common pursuit of a shared mission. Here it is the driving force of the gospel and the power of the Spirit that shape economic realities for the new community, allowing members to embody a stark alternative within their midst.

Gospel liberation beyond cheap freedom

What makes this picture of community of fellowship in Acts so odd, I think, is just how natural it seems to be for those captivated by the gospel. The fact that it seems so abnormal to us today says more about *us* than it does about anything else. Indeed, what would be odd to first century followers of the Way is how comfortable we’ve become with disconnecting economic practice from the ethics of the church. The early church never would have imagined that the freedom offered to members in Christ was merely freedom from Roman incursion into their private lives. In fact, they knew that affiliation with the new movement would do exactly the opposite. What they found in the community of the church was the freedom for friendship, mutual provision, care, and sustained hope. They found these things together in service of the good news, convinced that because of God’s work in Christ, the future of things would look more like their fellowship than the violence and dominance of the empire. After all, that is what attracted them in the first place: the possibility of an entirely different life, which is why

¹⁷ See James Wm. McClendon, Jr.’s outline of such in *Ethics: Systematic Theology Volume I*, Second Edition (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002; reprint, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 248.

the sharing of possessions here looks so natural and normal and not erratically idealistic. *Koinonia* was the most vivid mark that God's promise to establish his kingdom was being fulfilled (πεπλήρωται) (Lk. 4:21), not the initiation of totalitarian control. As a matter of fact, if the story of Ananias and Sapphira recounted a few chapters later in the book of a later chapter of Acts (Acts 5: 1-11) is taken as our cue, then it would appear that adherence to the security of possessions and property might be really dangerous.

It's no secret that the church rarely embodies this kind of fellowship in our own day. Such was the case even before the decline of people's institutions and social fabric that is occurring everywhere in our society.¹⁸ But to the extent that we continue to embrace the ersatz freedom advocated by the economic individualism of Hayek, and later channeled by Beck, and which now dominates our society, we remain subject to the same abusive trends of increasing isolation, competition, job insecurity, debt, and disparity. In the U.S. today, credit card debt is at an all-time high – not because people are indulging themselves, but mainly because they use credit to cover basic and emergency expenses.¹⁹ One fifth of all American workers now hold freelance or temporary jobs that offer irregular pay and no benefits.²⁰ Experts suggest this trend will only increase, even as social safety nets are being dismantled. Meanwhile, income and wealth disparity have skyrocketed to levels never seen. According to Oxfam's latest report, the 41 richest people in the world now own more wealth than the bottom fifty percent of the planet's

¹⁸ Regarding the decline of institutions, see Hugh Heclo, *On Thinking Institutionally* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2008) and Michael Gecan, *People's Institutions in Decline: Causes, Consequences, Cures* (Chicago: ACTA Publishing, 2018). See also Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

¹⁹ "Rising Interest Rates Could Make it Tougher to Pay Off Credit Card Debt," CBS New York, February 8, 2018 available at: <https://newyork.cbslocal.com/2018/02/08/credit-card-debt/> accessed March 5, 2018.

²⁰ Yuki Noguchi, "Freelanced: The Rise of the Contract Workforce," NPR, January 22, 2018 available at: <https://www.npr.org/2018/01/22/578825135/rise-of-the-contract-workers-work-is-different-now> accessed March 5, 2018.

population, with the top one percent claiming 82 percent of all the global wealth generated in 2017.²¹ Many of the world's nations, the U.S. foremost among them, now find their people swamped with debt, while the pressure to cut taxes and public services moves forward at a galloping pace.²² Oddly enough, this means that both states and individuals now find themselves in the position of taking on mounting debt in order to keep the global market running – a market we initially accepted on the premise that it would improve our standard of living so as to free us from the primal anxiety associated with meeting our needs. In the end, this may be a kind of human sacrifice to a god that now claims a certain kind of tyranny over us.

Regarding the inevitable result of market-style freedom, understood merely as “complete freedom from constraint,” the political theorist Jeffrey Stout says, “A society marked by freedom *from constraint* is in practice a society in which the strong are free *to dominate others* without fear of legal interference, effectively organized opposition from ordinary people, or even, for that matter, a guilty conscience.”²³ For those who have studied Hayek's work more closely, this should come as no surprise. Hayek was never shy about his allergy to social justice, writing at one point that:

What we have to deal with in the case of ‘social justice’ is simply a quasi-religious superstition of the kind which we should respectfully leave in peace so long as it merely makes those happy who hold it, but which we must fight when it becomes the pretext coercing other men. And the

²¹ Katie Hope, “‘World's richest 1% get 82% of the wealth,’ says Oxfam,” BBC, January 22, 2018 available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-42745853> accessed March 5, 2018.

²² For a description of the transition from the tax state to the debt state – not as a result of increased expenditures, but rather because of the implementation of policies that have decreased receipts – see Wolfgang Streeck, *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*, trans. Patrick Camiller (New York: Verso, 2014), chapter 2.

²³ Jeffrey Stout, *Blessed Are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 143.

prevailing belief in ‘social justice’ is at present probably the gravest threat to most other values of a free civilization.²⁴

It is safe to say that Hayek and his fellow ideologues have greatly succeeded in this fight against social justice, and that we now live in the shadow of a market that casts its simulacra of freedom across our lives. It is a reality that stands in stark contrast to the real vision of fellowship enjoyed by the gospel community.

Conclusion

In the paragraphs that remain, I want to flesh this argument out a bit more with respect to the current, prevailing economic order of our day, in order to describe the challenge Christian love (*koinonia*) might present to the dominance of the global market. If I am right in identifying a Hayekian conception of cheap economic freedom as the foundation of our current political and social order, then what we are in short supply of across the globe are larger collective projects that serve the common good. Indeed, this has been the cost of such cheap freedom, even as we may recognize the dangers associated with introducing larger collective projects, especially given the history of the past century. But avoiding collective projects has become its own form of captivity, something we are just now beginning to realize. So how might the kind of Christian communion depicted in Acts resist, challenge, and even subvert this captivity?

Christian love is not synonymous with what we have come to know as charity. Current conceptions of charity invoke actions that too often operate at distance from those in need and too often function as mere philanthropic stopgaps, attempting to

²⁴ F. A. Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty: A New Statement of the Liberal Principles of Justice and Political Economy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013; reprint 1976), vol. 2, 230 quoted in Streeck, *Buying Time*, 59, fn. 24.

assuage the more brutal effects of a society based on competition. But Christian love draws us into real fellowship and mutual provision. It is nothing if not materially sacrificial, physically involved, socially proximate and, therefore, radically countercultural. Writing on the social dimension of the gospel, the Dominican priest Herbert McCabe contends that “death and resurrection... does not mean departure from this world to some other separate world, it does not mean substituting another life for this one. It means revolutionary transformation and hence intensification of this bodily life.”²⁵ On the one hand, this implies recognizing the market as a power and principality whose functions have overwhelmingly come to structure our lives. At the same time, a prophetic critique of the disparities of wealth and power that are inherent in market economies is also necessary, as these disparities really do impact what is possible on the ground. On the other hand, it will be important to recognize that freedom within Christianity is not fully displayed in our independence from one another or in a sense of intensified individualism. Instead, it shows up in our connection and communion with one another, and with God, in ways that engender new social structures. Without promulgating naïve notions of human sinlessness, Christianity does hold that humans can be free to live together in a way that does not depend upon the competition, domination, and antagonism that serve market functions and through which the market alone binds us to one another.

Christianity is not merely an idea but a *praxis* (Acts!), a way of life that truly poses a practical challenge to the economized world we inhabit.²⁶ To glimpse what Christian love really means, we would likely need to look more to *mutualistas* or base

²⁵ Herbert McCabe, O.P., *God Matters* (New York: Continuum, 1987), 124-125.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 193.

communities, congregations involved in debt sharing – or to those engaged in community organizing to build affordable housing, provide health care, and negotiate living wages. We might also look to micro-political experiments in common life such as Clarence Jordan’s Koinonia Farm, the Moravian Herrnhut of the eighteenth century, or the mid-twentieth century Contract Buyers League in the Lawndale neighborhood of Chicago. No one says freedom is easy; that has never been a promise of discipleship. But this does not diminish the notion that freedom based in discipleship is where true liberation may be found. As G.K. Chesterton once wrote, “the Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.”²⁷ As a result, we have yet to know real freedom. God still invites us in the power of the Spirit to live in this freedom. Where the market has become divine, to paraphrase Bonhoeffer’s line, we find it’s cheap freedom to be the deadly enemy of the church; so we must creatively struggle today for the true freedom of discipleship.²⁸ All we have to lose are the chains of individualism, competition, fragmentation, nihilism, and militarism that characterize our market society.

²⁷ G. K. Chesterton, *What’s Wrong with the World* (1910), Ch. 1, Pt. 5.

²⁸ See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, First Touchstone edition (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1995), 43.